

ENGLISH LEARNING FOR CURIOUS MINDS



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Episode #126

Chocolate

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[00:00:00] Hello, hello hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:00:12] The show where you can listen to fascinating stories, and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:22] I'm Alastair Budge and today we are going to be talking about chocolate, the delicious sweet that is enjoyed by hundreds of millions of people around the world every single day.

[00:00:35] We'll talk about where it first came from, how it used to be consumed, how it developed into the version of chocolate that we know and love today, and we'll also

Chocolate

talk about the economics of chocolate, how it actually goes from a little [bean](#)¹ in an [equatorial](#)² farm through to a bar in your hand.

[00:00:56] The request for this episode came from two members on the same day, actually, Pierluca, from Italy, and Jenneke, from the Netherlands.

[00:01:04] So, Pierluca and Jenneke, thanks, I hope you enjoy this one.

[00:01:09] Before we get right into that though, let me quickly remind you that you can get all of the bonus episodes, plus the subtitles, that transcript and the key vocabulary for this episode and all of our other ones over on the website, which is Leonardoenglish.com.

[00:01:25] This is also where you can check out becoming a member of Leonardo English and join a community of curious minds from all over the world, doing meetups, exchanging ideas, and generally improving their English in a more interesting way.

[00:01:40] So if that is of interest, and I can't see a reason why it wouldn't be, then the place to go to is Leonardoenglish.com.

[00:01:50] OK then, chocolate.

[00:01:52] You know chocolate, you probably know something about chocolate, but you probably don't know everything about the fascinating story of its journey from

¹ a seed or pod containing seeds that comes from a plant

² near the equator

Chocolate

[spiritual](#)³ [bean](#) to the bar that is the [centrepiece](#)⁴ of the 100 billion dollar chocolate industry today.

[00:02:10] As I guess you do know, chocolate comes from the cacao [bean](#), a [bean](#) that is found inside a [pod](#)⁵ that grows on a tree called the Theobroma Cacao, a tree that is native to central America.

[00:02:25] If you go to Central America, find a Theobroma Cacao tree and cut down a load of cacao [pods](#)⁶, you will be disappointed to find that they don't seem very chocolatey at all.

[00:02:38] If you open up the [pod](#) you'll find a white, sticky [pulp](#)⁷, and if you get to the cacao [beans](#)⁸ and put one in your mouth you will probably think you've made a mistake and arrived at the wrong tree.

[00:02:53] A raw cacao [bean](#) is bitter, slightly different to very dark chocolate, but completely different to the kind of chocolate that you'll find in shops all around the world today, and that millions of people enjoy eating.

³ relating to deep, often religious, feelings

⁴ the most important part of something

⁵ a long, narrow part of a plant containing beans and/or seeds

⁶ the long, narrow parts of a plant containing beans and/or seeds

⁷ the soft, inside part of a fruit or vegetable

⁸ seeds or pods containing seeds that come from a plant

Chocolate

[00:03:07] Indeed, when cacao was first discovered, it wasn't something that was eaten.

[00:03:13] It was drunk.

[00:03:15] Now, there's a little bit of debate about when cacao was first discovered.

[00:03:21] In a recent book, called The True History of Chocolate, which, if you are interested in finding out the True History of Chocolate sounds like the sort of book that you should read, the authors suggest that chocolate goes back three or four thousand years.

[00:03:37] It certainly goes back to the [indigenous](#)⁹ Aztecs, who used to drink a sort of cacao [broth](#)¹⁰.

[00:03:44] This wasn't just raw cacao [beans](#) and water.

[00:03:49] The [beans](#) would be separated from the cacao [pods](#), then left outside for a week or so to [ferment](#)¹¹.

[00:03:57] They would then be cleaned and left to dry out in the sun for a couple of weeks, then roasted for another 1 to 2 hours.

⁹ naturally existing in a place

¹⁰ a thin soup

¹¹ goes through a chemical change, because of an active organism that exists inside

Chocolate

[00:04:06] The beans would then be crushed¹² open, and the raw¹³ pieces inside could be ground down¹⁴ into a paste¹⁵.

[00:04:15] And it was this paste that was then used as the base¹⁶ for the drink.

[00:04:21] Depending on how rich you were, you would drink it in different ways.

[00:04:26] For a cheap, normal day-to-day drink these roasted cacao beans would be mixed with maize¹⁷, with corn, and spices, for a warm, refreshing and revitalising¹⁸ drink.

[00:04:41] But if money was no object¹⁹, you wouldn't bother with the added corn, instead you would add more pure cacao and extra spices.

[00:04:52] For the Aztecs, these cacao drinks were about more than just being tasty.

¹² pressed hard so that it breaks

¹³ not cooked

¹⁴ pressed into many small pieces

¹⁵ a thick, soft substance

¹⁶ the main part

¹⁷ a tall plant with yellow seeds, which when harvested is called 'corn'

¹⁸ making you feel better

¹⁹ if something is no object, it doesn't matter

Chocolate

[00:04:58] They viewed it as having [spiritual](#) and medicinal [properties](#)²⁰, they thought that it could cure those who drank it of illnesses such as fever and tiredness, and - somewhat surprisingly when we think of the effects of chocolate today, they thought it could cure tooth [decay](#)²¹. They thought it could cure problems with your teeth.

[00:05:20] The Aztecs believed the [bean](#) was a gift from the gods, specifically a gift from a god called Quetzalcoatl, the god of wind and wisdom.

[00:05:31] One ruler of the Aztecs, Montezuma II, reportedly believed so strongly in its [beneficial](#)²² [properties](#) that he would drink it 50 times a day.

[00:05:43] When the Spanish Conquistadors arrived in the Americas they were initially confused about this strange [bean](#) that the local people were so passionate about.

[00:05:54] The King of the Aztecs, Montezuma II, our 50 cups of chocolate a day ruler, reportedly [threw a banquet](#)²³ for Cortes and his men that included [vast](#) amounts of chocolate, or [vast](#)²⁴ amounts of this cacao drink.

[00:06:08] The Spaniards tasted the cacao drink, but weren't convinced, with one even writing that it was a 'bitter drink for pigs'.

²⁰ qualities

²¹ damage

²² helpful or useful

²³ prepared a large meal

²⁴ very large

Chocolate

[00:06:21] But Cortes saw that it was considered pretty special and, after he had taken Montezuma II prisoner, he took some cacao [beans](#) back to Spain.

[00:06:31] So, this is the next step on chocolate's journey, its arrival in Europe.

[00:06:38] Exactly when this [precious²⁵ bean](#) first arrived on European shores is debated, but it's likely some time at the start of the 16th century.

[00:06:50] But for the majority of the 16th century, it was [confined²⁶](#) to Spain, it didn't really spread much [further afield²⁷](#).

[00:07:00] It was consumed in a similar way to the Aztecs, as a drink, but it was very much a [preserve²⁸](#) of the wealthiest in society.

[00:07:08] These [beans](#) were [in scarce supply²⁹](#), they had to be shipped over from the Americas, and it was a real luxury.

[00:07:20] By the start of the 17th century this cacao drink had spread to France.

[00:07:26] In 1615, when King Louis XIII of France married the daughter of King Phillip III of Spain, the daughter, Anne, brought cacao to celebrate the marriage.

²⁵ of great value

²⁶ limited

²⁷ far away (from where you are)

²⁸ if something is the preserve of a group, it is only available to them

²⁹ if something is in scarce supply, it is very rare

Chocolate

[00:07:39] Chocolate, or rather cacao, was still in its liquid form, a cacao drink, but it was starting to take off.

[00:07:48] It had spread to Britain, and European countries with colonial empires started to set up their own cacao [plantations](#)³⁰ in [equatorial](#) countries.

[00:07:59] Cacao requires very [specific](#)³¹ conditions to grow.

[00:08:03] It can only grow in environments with very high humidity, the trees require a lot of [shade](#)³², and if the temperature drops below about 18 degrees Celsius the plants will die.

[00:08:16] So, you simply can't grow it in Europe in natural conditions, but that didn't stop Europeans from developing quite the taste for it.

[00:08:27] In wealthy circles in Europe it was considered a fashionable, healthy drink, full of [beneficial](#) properties.

[00:08:35] It was believed to be good for your health, and was also considered to be an [aphrodisiac](#)³³, a [substance](#)³⁴ that increases sexual desire.

³⁰ large farms, often in hot parts of the world, where a particular plant is grown

³¹ particular

³² the darkness caused when something blocks the light from the sun

³³ something used to increase sexual desire

³⁴ solid, liquid or gas

Chocolate

[00:08:45] Indeed, Casanova, perhaps the most famous European womaniser, was reportedly a huge fan of cacao.

[00:08:54] But these Europeans were still drinking cacao, not eating it.

[00:08:59] What you and I know as chocolate wasn't to come until 1828, and was to be invented by a man from a country that you might not traditionally associate with chocolate - The Netherlands.

[00:09:13] In 1828 a chemist from Amsterdam, called Coenraad Johannes van Houten, invented a way to make [powdered³⁵](#) chocolate.

[00:09:22] He invented a [press³⁶](#) that could separate about half the natural fat in the bit in the middle of the cacao [bean](#).

[00:09:31] This left a sort of cacao [powder³⁷](#), which could either be used for drinking or could be mixed again with the cacao butter or sugar to create a solid version, something similar to what we would now know as a chocolate bar.

³⁵ in the form of powder

³⁶ a machine that puts a lot of weight on something in order to change it

³⁷ a dry substance made up of tiny solid pieces

Chocolate

[00:09:49] Van Houten [patented](#)³⁸ his machine, he protected his invention so only he could separate the fat from the cacao [bean](#) in this way, but the [patent](#)³⁹ only lasted for 7 years, expiring in 1835.

[00:10:05] The century following this can be described as the golden age of chocolate, and many of the chocolates that you and I probably enjoy today were invented in this period, from the 1830s to the 1930s.

[00:10:20] The first chocolate bar was made in 1847 by a company called Fry's in England.

[00:10:28] Then in 1875 a Swiss [chocolatier](#)⁴⁰ called Daniel Peter had the bright idea of adding milk to chocolate to create, you guessed it, milk chocolate.

[00:10:40] And four years later, in 1879, another Swiss [chocolatier](#), a man called Rodolphe Lindt invented something called conching, which is a process that changes the chocolate from a [powdery](#)⁴¹ state to more of a liquidy one. And, makes the flavour more evenly [distributed](#)⁴² and more delicious.

³⁸ if something is patented, only the holder of the 'patent' has the legal right to produce it

³⁹ a legal document that means only you can produce something

⁴⁰ someone who makes chocolate

⁴¹ like powder

⁴² spread

Chocolate

[00:11:03] With the industrialisation of the production of chocolate, and a reduction in the cost of bringing the cacao [beans](#) over from the Americas, what was previously something just for the wealthiest became a lot more affordable to people in Europe.

[00:11:19] The arrival of the chocolate bar came at almost the perfect time.

[00:11:24] Firstly, the European [workforce](#)⁴³ was changing. People were starting to work away from their homes, people were [commuting](#)⁴⁴, and needing to eat 'on the go'.

[00:11:37] Chocolate was an ideal [snack](#)⁴⁵. It was tasty, it filled you up, it didn't need to be cooked or heated, you didn't need to get your hands dirty, and it was affordable.

[00:11:48] It was perfect.

[00:11:50] And at the start of the 20th century it was also the beginning of the advertising [boom](#)⁴⁶. Chocolate was a perfect product to be put on [billboards](#)⁴⁷, on posters around cities, to be advertised in magazines and newspapers, and of course later on, on TV.

⁴³ the people who work

⁴⁴ traveling to and from work

⁴⁵ a small amount of food eaten between meals

⁴⁶ a period of increased economic activity

⁴⁷ the large boards on which adverts are shown

Chocolate

[00:12:08] It was a product that anyone could enjoy, man or woman, young or old, and given that it was now mass produced, it was cheap and therefore enjoyed by millions of people every day.

[00:12:23] Now, the [flip side](#)⁴⁸ of this affordability is how chocolate was and is produced.

[00:12:30] If we go back to the early days of cacao, the [beans](#) were frequently produced by slave labour, by people working in [horrendous](#)⁴⁹ conditions while the European rich enjoyed their delicious chocolatey [beverages](#)⁵⁰.

[00:12:46] And even now, despite the fact that it's the world's favourite sweet snack [by a country mile](#)⁵¹, cacao farmers, the people who actually produce the chocolate are some of the poorest people in the world.

[00:13:01] Farming cacao, farming chocolate, is difficult, tough work.

[00:13:06] Each cacao [pod](#) produces about 30 to 40 [beans](#), and it takes around 80 [beans](#) to make 100 grammes of chocolate.

⁴⁸ the opposite, less good aspect of something

⁴⁹ terrible

⁵⁰ drinks

⁵¹ by a long way

Chocolate

[00:13:13] So, depending on the size and purity of the chocolate bar, it can take anywhere from 2 to 5 entire pods to make your chocolate bar.

[00:13:28] And one worker can separate the [beans](#) from about 2,000 pods per day. So, if you do the maths, a worker can separate enough [beans](#) to make anywhere from 400 to 1,000 bars of chocolate.

[00:13:44] And that's just the separation stage.

[00:13:47] So if you think of all the other costs involved in the other stages, and remember that you can buy a chocolate bar from your local supermarket for really not very much money at all, you realise that these people are evidently not getting much of the final price that you are paying.

[00:14:05] Related to this is the question of who else is involved in the process of getting a cacao [bean](#) from a tree near the Equator through to your hand, ready to be [scoffed down](#)⁵².

[00:14:19] Cacao, like most [commodities](#)⁵³, such as coffee or sugar, is often bought and sold by [trading houses](#)⁵⁴, companies that will buy up large quantities of cacao in order to sell it on to chocolate companies.

⁵² (informal) eaten quickly

⁵³ a good that can be bought and sold

⁵⁴ companies that buy and sell products

Chocolate

[00:14:34] The price of cacao goes up and down a lot based on its supply, based on how much of it there is.

[00:14:41] If there is a lot of cacao on the market, the price tends to go down, and if there isn't enough cacao available, the price goes up.

[00:14:50] But you and I, as consumers of chocolate, as people who eat chocolate, we don't really see this.

[00:14:57] We don't go to a shop one day and find that a chocolate bar is 50 cents and then come back the next week to see it's at 80, then the week after it's at 30.

[00:15:08] One of the reasons for this is because there is a whole industry of people buying and selling things called chocolate '[futures⁵⁵](#)', or cacao [futures](#).

[00:15:19] You can think of these as a contract to buy something at a fixed price in the future, no matter what the actual market price at that time is.

[00:15:30] To give you an example, if the price of cacao now is \$3,000 a [tonne](#), a cacao farmer can sell a [tonne](#) of cacao now for \$3,000.

[00:15:43] Or, someone could go to the farmer and say "I'll buy a [tonne](#) of cacao from you for \$3,000 in 6 months time".

⁵⁵ agreements to buy or sell a product in the future

Chocolate

[00:15:53] If they agree to do this, the farmer knows that they will have a buyer for their product for \$3,000. And for the trader, they know that they can get this cacao in 6 months time for a fixed price.

[00:16:08] But if the price in 6 months time is higher, let's say it's \$3,500, the trader can pay the arranged \$3,000 price, and sell the cacao immediately on to someone else and take a \$500 profit.

[00:16:24] And this is what's happening all over the world, except of course in much higher quantities than people buying a [tonne](#)⁵⁶ at a time.

[00:16:33] Indeed, a British [commodities](#) trader, a man called Anthony Ward once bought up contracts for 15% of the world's cacao, 15% of all the cacao in the world, earning himself the nickname Chocfinger, after the Bond [villain](#)⁵⁷ Goldfinger.

[00:16:53] These traders make a profit from knowing what direction the price will go - they try to get as much information as possible on future [harvests](#)⁵⁸, whether there will be the right amount of rain and so on, in order to make [bets](#)⁵⁹ on the price.

[00:17:10] And most don't ever actually come into contact with a single cacao [bean](#) - the contracts are sold on to chocolate producers, who want to deal with traders who

⁵⁶ 1,000 kg

⁵⁷ a bad person

⁵⁸ the time of year when crops are cut and collected

⁵⁹ bets in order to make money

Chocolate

can sell them hundreds or thousands of [tonnes](#)⁶⁰ of cacao, rather than a few [tonnes](#) at a time.

[00:17:26] And the great [irony](#)⁶¹ perhaps of chocolate is that, while it is such a common, affordable snack for most of us in the West, where we can never actually grow it, in the countries where cacao is actually grown, the farmers who grow it aren't sitting around eating chocolate bars all day, and they aren't getting much of the economic benefits of the world's hunger for chocolate.

[00:17:51] The top four chocolate producing countries in the world, Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria, Ghana and Indonesia are in the bottom 50% when it comes to GDP per capita, when it comes to how wealthy they are, and cacao farmers are some of the poorest people in these countries.

[00:18:10] And when it comes to the countries that actually eat the most chocolate, they are all in Europe, with Switzerland, one of the richest countries in the world, coming in top at an average of 8.8kg of chocolate consumed per person per year.

[00:18:27] So, it is one of the [peculiarities](#)⁶², and some might say an [injustice](#)⁶³, of the chocolate supply chain that the farmer who spends their life [harvesting](#)⁶⁴ cacao [beans](#)

⁶⁰ thousands of kg

⁶¹ a situation which is funny or strange because something unexpected happens

⁶² strange things

⁶³ something that is not fair or right

⁶⁴ picking or collecting crops

Chocolate

in the [sweltering](#)⁶⁵ midday sun rarely if ever gets to taste a chocolate bar, and the trader who spends their life [speculating](#)⁶⁶ on the price of cacao [beans](#) in an office in New York or London rarely, if ever, actually sees a cacao [bean](#).

[00:18:57] OK then, that is it for today's episode on chocolate.

[00:19:03] I hope it's been an interesting one, and that you've learnt something new.

[00:19:05] And as a final reminder, if you are looking to improve your English in a more interesting way, to join a community of curious minds from all over the world, to unlock the transcripts, the subtitles and key vocabulary, then the place to go to is Leonardoenglish.com.

[00:19:24] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:19:29] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF EPISODE]

⁶⁵ uncomfortably hot

⁶⁶ betting on the future price of something

Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Bean	a seed or pod containing seeds that comes from a plant
Equatorial	near the equator
Spiritual	relating to deep, often religious, feelings
Centrepiece	the most important part of something
Pod	a long, narrow part of a plant containing beans and/or seeds
Pods	the long, narrow parts of a plant containing beans and/or seeds
Pulp	the soft, inside part of a fruit or vegetable
Beans	seeds or pods containing seeds that come from a plant
Indigenous	naturally existing in a place
Broth	a thin soup
Ferment	goes through a chemical change, because of an active organism that exists inside
Crushed	pressed hard so that it breaks

Chocolate

Raw	not cooked
Ground down	pressed into many small pieces
Paste	a thick, soft substance
Base	the main part
Maize	a tall plant with yellow seeds, which when harvested is called 'corn'
Revitalising	making you feel better
No object	if something is no object, it doesn't matter
Properties	qualities
Decay	damage
Beneficial	helpful or useful
Threw a banquet	prepared a large meal
Vast	very large
Precious	of great value
Confined	limited
Further afield	far away (from where you are)

Chocolate

Preserve	if something is the preserve of a group, it is only available to them
In scarce supply	if something is in scarce supply, it is very rare
Plantations	large farms, often in hot parts of the world, where a particular plant is grown
Specific	particular
Shade	the darkness caused when something blocks the light from the sun
Aphrodisiac	something used to increase sexual desire
Substance	solid, liquid or gas
Powdered	in the form of powder
Press	a machine that puts a lot of weight on something in order to change it
Powder	a dry substance made up of tiny solid pieces
Patented	if something is patented, only the holder of the 'patent' has the legal right to produce it
Patent	a legal document that means only you can produce something
Chocolatier	someone who makes chocolate
Powdery	like powder
Distributed	spread

Chocolate

Workforce	the people who work
Commuting	traveling to and from work
Snack	a small amount of food eaten between meals
Boom	a period of increased economic activity
Billboards	the large boards on which adverts are shown
Flip side	the opposite, less good aspect of something
Horrendous	terrible
Beverages	drinks
By a country mile	by a long way
Scoffed down	(informal) eaten quickly
Commodities	a good that can be bought and sold
Trading houses	companies that buy and sell products
Futures	agreements to buy or sell a product in the future
Tonne	1,000 kg
Villain	a bad person

Chocolate

Harvests	the time of year when crops are cut and collected
Bets	bets in order to make money
Tonnes	thousands of kg
Irony	a situation which is funny or strange because something unexpected happens
Peculiarities	strange things
Injustice	something that is not fair or right
Harvesting	picking or collecting crops
Sweltering	uncomfortably hot
Speculating	betting on the future price of something

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